



Manitou Foundation

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Attn: Forest Plan Revision

Dan Dallas, Supervisor

Rio Grande National Forest

1803 W. Highway 160

Monte Vista, CO 81144

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December 17, 2017

Dear Mr. Dallas,

On behalf of the Manitou Foundation, Manitou Institute & Conservancy and the Manitou Habitat Conservation Program - I am writing in response to support the conservation designations in Alternative D within the RGNF 20-year Management Plan. The Manitou Foundations "Mountain Tract" traverses the west boundary of the Forest Services acquired upper Baca Mountain Tract Parcel. As adjacent landowners and stewards, we are concerned about the potential for future environmental disturbances and long term impacts if these areas are not designated "Wilderness".

For over two-decades, Manitou has conducted extensive biological studies and surveys in partnership with the Laurance Rockefeller Trust, the Jackson Hole Preserve and the Conservation Fund; in order to preserve this unique bioregion and wildlife habitats on the Baca Mountain Tract. Currently, Manitou has protected over 1,800 acres under Manitou's Habitat Conservation Program (MHCP), placing a two-fold conservation easement across the entire mountain tract. Manitou's Conservation Program not only prohibits development of sensitive areas, our site specific parcel "Conservation Easements" (CE) set limits on total build out, minimizes density of development, and ultimately maintains the integrity of the land. Because of policies implemented by our Conservation Program the MHCP effectively preserves the integrity of well-over 90% of the entire mountain tract and achieves the desired goal of stabilizing habitats.

Beyond this, Manitou's Conservation guidelines safeguard several unique sand formations, viewsheds, and cultural resources at Pyramid Mountain and throughout the mountain tract. Since the mountain's watershed is integral to the landscape and provides drinking water, Manitou is mandated to protect riparian corridors and preserve related seeps and springs. Following recommendations in a study made by the Conservation Fund, Manitou has designated many areas within the mountain tract "preserve – No Development" areas because of the biological diversity – sensitive nature and major wildlife habitats/corridors.

Over the years we have witnessed extreme cases of erosion (resulting in enormous financial expenditures towards mitigation and restoration) care should be taken to minimize surface disturbances, soil compaction in order to protect fine sandy soils and the habitats they support. Many of the soils throughout the RGNF 20-year Management Plan are susceptible to erosion and degradation from heavy usage. Many important plant communities are located on these "stabilized" sandsheets and several are considered "sensitive" by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program. The sandsheets provide shelter for small burrowing arthropods and vertebrates which serve as critical food sources for small mammals. Intensive uses, however infrequent, can cause severe soil compaction, injure native vegetation, and encourage colonization by invasive plant species.

The San Luis Valley is an extraordinary landscape – from its pristine rivers, mountains, vegetation, forests, pre-historic Sacred sites – and home to many diverse Contemplative Retreat Communities that require quietude. These are all integral and critical to the survival of many wildlife species and diverse human inhabitants.

Laurance Rockefeller had a deep connection to the land and people of the San Luis Valley, he felt a strong sense of stewardship and support for the contemplative community. Laurance financed Manitou's Conservation Program to protect the resources for future generations. We are one of the few "intact" ecosystems within the Southwest and further support protection of: the 285,000 acres recommended for wilderness, Carnero and Jim Creek Native Fish Areas, Chama Basin Watershed Protection Area, the Spruce-Osier connectivity area and the expanded La Ventana Special Interest Area (SIA). We support establishing native fish protection areas with strong management requirements to help sustain and restore the native trout populations. We support establishing the Chama Basin Watershed Protection Area and the Spruce-Osier wildlife corridor to protect clean water and wildlife movement and habitat connectivity. We support the expanded La Ventana Special Interest Area (SIA) to protect the larger footprint of a significant geologic landmark that also overlaps with areas identified by Colorado Natural Heritage Program for unique and rare botanical values. It is especially important to us that oil and gas surface development is not allowed in these places to protect their special values. It is also important to me that the plan have enforceable provisions to protect water, wildlife, and other resources. While I support all the designations in Alternative D, I want to in particular highlight my support for: *the additions to the Sangre de*

Cristo Wilderness, Wannamaker Creek-Deep Creek addition to the La Garita Wilderness, Adams Fork Addition, Three Forks addition to South San Juan Wilderness, Antora Meadows Recommended Wilderness, and Saguache Creek Recommended Wilderness.

The RGNF 20-year Management Plan is focusing on several tracts of lands with high conservation value in our Valley. We know that conservation requires both a sense of urgency and foresight – therefore we respectfully submit our strong support for Alternative D within the RGNF 20-year Management Plan. We must all work together and protect what is at stake.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Hanne Strong". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "H" and a stylized "S".

Hanne Strong,

President Manitou Foundation and Manitou Institute & Conservancy